

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 106 NO. 1 WINTER 2022



FLIGHT OF THE CONDOR

BY ERIC SCHROEDER

Joseph Belli picked up a ping from a GPS transmitter at 8:30 a.m. on September 12, 2021, as his subject crossed the Altamont Pass. A short while later, the subject circled Mount Diablo, and within two hours, headed back south. If you'd been on the mountain that day and looked up, you might have seen her, a California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), with a wingspan of over nine feet, the largest bird in North America.

CONTINUED on page 3

Condor 828 soaring over Pinnacles National Park.
Tim Huntington





Peter Shen

Steller's Jay on bench.

BUILDING A CASE FOR BETTER BIRD NAMES

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

At a recent parent event at my daughter's school in Orinda, a large, noisy blue bird with a black crest flew over the assembled parents in the school garden. The head of the school looked me right in the eyes and announced that the school mascot, a "Blue Jay", had arrived to welcome us. We both knew it was a Steller's Jay that had flown by and she expected me to correct her. This time, I didn't. In the moment, I wondered, 'why did this bird need to carry the name of a German explorer? What did the Chochenyo-speaking Huchiun people who lived here call this bird?

Unfortunately, the Chochenyo name for this bird is lost to mankind, a victim of the same colonialism that doomed the Dodo.

The related Mutsun-speaking people called it KiKi, and the Plains Miwok-speaking people, including the neighboring Saklan, called it KajKajtJaja, both of which echo the easily recognizable call of this bird.

The Steller's Jay and the Blue Jay are in fact closely related, so calling the crested, blue and black jays of the west, "blue jays", is correct if we are only identifying the birds at the genus level. Who would look down on someone for correctly identifying a flycatcher as a member of the genus Empidonax, while not being able to distinguish which species? Even the English name "jay" is suspect here. New world jays are not particularly closely related to the European Jay, which is in the same sub-

family with crows and ravens, as opposed to the New World jay subfamily.

In November, Golden Gate Audubon endorsed the Bird Names for Birds movement, joining David Allen Sibley and hundreds of other scientists and conservation groups in calling for the end of eponyms in the official common names for birds. "Western Blue Jay" tells you so much more about the bird: where it lives and what other species are closely related to it, while also avoiding associations with colonialism and racism that names like Steller, Scott, and McCown conjure. At the same time, we open doors for new people to love and take care of the birds whose planet we share. (Being dinosaurs, birds were here first.)

NEWS BRIEFS

Altamont Pass Update

In response to Alameda County's failure to require an adequate environmental impact report on the proposed Mulqueeney Ranch Wind Farm project in the Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area, Golden Gate Audubon along with other local Audubon chapters filed a lawsuit in early November 2021.

Winter Classes

Winter is finally here, which means our adult education class schedule is up and registration is open. This line up includes new classes on gulls in Northern California and swifts and hummingbirds, plus introductory classes and classes on shorebirds, diving birds and birding by ear. Check out our website for more information.

Annual Report 2021

The 2021 Golden Gate Audubon Annual Report is now publicly available on our website. Check out what we've been working on over the past fiscal year. From our education programs to our restoration and conservation projects, the annual report is a great way to see your contributions in action.

FLIGHT OF THE CONDOR from page 1

Belli, a volunteer at Pinnacles National Park, knew this particular bird, Condor 828. In April 2016, she was the first chick to fledge successfully there since condors were reintroduced in 2003. At five-and-a-half years old, she's almost mature, and, as Belli says, "She likes to roam." But her visit to Mount Diablo was something new. Although juveniles without their own territories are known to explore new places, none had ever been documented venturing this far north into the Bay Area.

Twenty-five years ago, condors were on the brink of extinction due to habitat loss, shooting, egg collection and poisoning. But a captive breeding program with the last remaining 27 condors, run by the San Diego Wild Animal Park and Los Angeles Zoo, proved successful. Two condors were initially reintroduced into the wild in 1992. Today wild populations exist in southern California, Arizona, Baja California (Mexico), Big Sur, and Pinnacles. As of 2020, there were 504 living California condors, 329 of which fly free.

These birds still commonly face setbacks however. Generally hatching just one egg per year, California Condors are susceptible to natural calamities and human-caused hazards. Fourteen birds died from the Dolan



Matt Mais

Tiana Williams-Claussen, Director of Yurok Tribe Wildlife Department, with California Condor.

As of 2020, there were 504 living California condors, 329 of which fly free.

fire near Big Sur in 2020, and another 13 from the central California flock died from dangers such as lead poisoning. The overall mortality rate for the central California population was 20 percent last year—much higher than the three to five percent rate that Belli says condors need to be self-sustaining in the wild.

But there's good news, too. A collaboration between the Yurok tribe from the Klamath River area on the California-Oregon border and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will soon expand the range of condors in California. Condors (*prey-go-neesh* in Yurok) are the top birds in the Yurok ceremonial hierarchy. Soaring up to 15,000 feet, they are thought to carry prayers to heaven. According to Tiana Williams-Claussen, director of the Yurok Tribe Wildlife Department, four juveniles, three males and a female, will arrive in February 2022 and be released later in spring.

Other startling news about condor propagation came in November when San Diego Zoo scientists announced two cases of parthenogenesis—a rare event when an egg becomes an embryo without the introduction of sperm. It's been observed

in chickens, pigeons and some finches, but the offspring rarely survive. While examining the genetic database for California Condors, researchers noticed two chicks were biologically fatherless. Each bird carried genes from its mother but neither had genes from any male bird in the database. One bird died while still a juvenile, but the other lived to be eight and died from complications of an injured foot.

Meanwhile, could the September sighting of Condor 828 over Mount Diablo signal the arrival of a condor population in the East Bay? Unlikely, according to Belli.

"Condors are very, very social birds and don't really stake out new territories," Belli said. "The birds in the Central California flock haven't migrated more than 35-40 miles from their original release sites."

Still, 828's brief visit highlights the need for us to keep our local skies safe for all kinds of winged creatures. Golden Gate Audubon Society returned to court this fall to protect birds and bats from a poorly-planned expansion of wind turbines at Altamont Pass. We're fighting not just for Golden Eagles, Red-tailed Hawks, and American Kestrels—but also for the occasional California Condor like number 828.



Mark Mauno

California Condor.

THE INAUGURAL BERKELEY BIRD FESTIVAL

BY RYAN NAKANO

From the Peregrine Falcons nesting in the Campanile of the UC campus to the hummingbirds zipping along in backyards, birds are everywhere in Berkeley.

At the same time, many common backyard birds in Berkeley including; Chickadees, Juncos and Woodpeckers, risk facing a significant population decline from climate change, according to a report from the National Audubon Society.

In an attempt to celebrate the city's diverse birdlife and acknowledge the resilience of these winged wonders, Golden Gate Audubon and the California Institute for Community, Art, and Nature (California I CAN) organized the first ever Berkeley Bird Festival on Sunday, October 17, 2021.

Spread between the UC Berkeley Campus, the David Brower Center and nine distinct birding hotspots in the greater Berkeley area, the festival offered attendees multiple opportunities to learn about the lives of their feathered neighbors and the important role they play in the local ecosystem.

Over 200 new and seasoned birders alike enjoyed guided birding field trips throughout Berkeley; exploring Aquatic Park, the UC Botanical Garden, Vollmer Peak in Tilden and Cesar Chavez Park, among other sites.

Following the lead of Golden Gate Audubon Eco-Ed Director Clay Anderson, individuals and families chalked their favorite birds onto concrete in front of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology and the Li Ka Shing center on campus. Across the

way at the David Brower Center, a four-hour-long program of bird stories, images, poems, songs, and demonstrations took place upstairs in the form of *Winged Wonderment*. Just outside of the *Winged Wonderment* program, groups participated in painting birds with watercolor, folding origami cranes and building pinecone bird feeders.

By the end of the day, an estimated 1,000 attendees took part in some aspect of the festival's programming. Importantly, the 350 East Bay action table collected over 100 signatures to be sent to Congress to pass legislation known as the Build Back Better Act to combat climate change.

With many people turning to the outdoors since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, birdwatching has seen a dramatic increase in popularity and the inaugural Berkeley Bird Festival was a perfect way to foster that energy, excitement and willingness to take action to protect local birds and their environment.

The Berkeley Bird Festival was made possible by the financial support of the UC Berkeley Chancellor's Community Partnership Fund, and the following partnerships; the UC Botanical Garden at Berkeley, the UC Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Cal Falcons, David Brower Center, Bay Nature, and Berkeleyside.



Youth participate in chalk art for the Berkeley Bird Festival.

Ryan Nakano

UPCOMING EVENTS

Engaging Elders in Climate Change

January 9, 2 - 4 p.m. on Zoom

Bill McKibben co-founded 350.org to mobilize youth to address climate change. Now McKibben is calling on the older generation to step up to support youth activists. For more information on this talk, visit ashbyvillage.org

Great Backyard Bird Count

February 18–21

Didn't get your fill of bird counts this winter? Join the Great Backyard Bird Count and spend as little as 15 minutes counting birds to be submitted to birdcount.org from February 18 - 21. Your data will help researchers better understand the health of our bird populations.

Birdathon

March 12 – April 24

We're returning to in-person field trips for this year's Birdathon running from March 12 to April 24. Don't miss this opportunity to experience one-of-a-kind birding trips while contributing to Golden Gate Audubon so we can continue offering free field trips throughout the rest of the year.



Mark Rauzon

Two Ashy Storm-petrels with six Fork-tailed Storm-petrels.

ASHY STORM-PETREL IN PERIL: A FARALLON ISLANDS STORY

BY WHITNEY GROVER

Standing on the coast, looking out at the Pacific Ocean, it's easy to see why early colonizers considered this the end of the earth. On clear days, due west of the Golden Gate, you can barely make out the sharp tooth of islands on the horizon.

Venturing out by boat, you lose sight of land but miraculously, you are not alone. First Gulls and Murres, then; Shearwaters, Jaegers, Auklets, Puffins and Albatross come into view. Further out you'll find the Storm-petrels, impossibly small birds zooming over the sea.

Their drab gray bodies are shorter than a robin's, but their wingspan is twice as long. They prey on small sea creatures at night, drink seawater and nest in rocky crags.

Most humans will never see an Ashy Storm-petrel, and you'd think all their adaptations to a world outside our bounds would keep them safe. Unfortunately, seabirds worldwide face many human caused threats and Ashy Storm-petrels are designated endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Thirty miles off San Francisco Bay is that mysterious tooth: the Farallon Islands. Half the world's Ashy Storm-petrel population nests there along with many other seabird species, marine mammals, reptiles, and insects. But there's one animal found on the islands you will certainly recognize, brought by humans: the house mouse.

Humans came to the Farallones in the 1800s and centuries of coming and going left the natural state of the island heavily impacted. Today, the Island is a Natural Wildlife Refuge, and the only humans allowed are biologists, tasked with studying and protecting its natural resources. Improvements have been made including removal of other introduced species such as cats and rabbits. But the house mouse remains, and they're a serious problem for the Ashy Storm-petrel.

On the island, house mouse populations increase each year just in time for raptor migration, bringing in Burrowing Owls (not

naturally occurring there) who are attracted by the food supply. The Burrowing Owls stay, the mouse populations decline, eventually crashing to low levels. The timing of this crash is unfortunate, as seabird chicks are hatching. Burrowing Owls switch to a diet of the young Ashy Storm-petrel and others. The house mouse populations bounce back, and today they are at plague levels. Humans created this new food web and it happened too quickly to allow the birds to adapt. Scientists at Point Blue Conservation Science have determined that eradication of the house mouse will allow the Ashy Storm-petrel populations to rebound.

Thirteen years ago U.S. Fish and Wildlife began a study culminating in a 2019 published plan to eradicate the invasive house mouse from the South Farallon Island. Although rodenticide will be used, it is not without serious consideration of the environmental impacts and review of all possible alternatives. The plan also uses case studies of other islands where the same techniques were used successfully. Rodenticide should always be a last resort, but unfortunately that's where we are in correcting the ecological imbalance to protect these sensitive seabird species from potential extinction.



Susan MacWhorter

Housing structures now occupied by Point Blue staff and volunteers on the Farallon Islands.



Lazuli Bunting.

Eddie Bartley

GARDENING FOR BIRDS

NOREEN WEEDEN AND
EDDIE BARTLEY

ONLINE

Thursday, January 20
7 p.m. program
Zoom

You can have a beautiful native plant garden that attracts amazing birds, butterflies and other wildlife. Learn about the benefits of local native plants and some of the wonderful birds that are drawn to this place and to these plants. Noreen Weeden and Eddie Bartley will discuss what migrating and resident birds need and how to provide what the birds are seeking.

Eddie Bartley is President of the Yerba Buena chapter of CNPS and the Farallon Islands Foundation. He is an avian researcher and instructor for the California Academy of Sciences and Golden Gate Audubon. Noreen Weeden was formerly Volunteer Director with Golden Gate Audubon and is currently project managing a habitat restoration project. She is on the board of Yerba Buena CNPS.

Our monthly Speaker Series is now online!

To receive email alerts with links to each Zoom presentation, email us at mturner@goldengateaudubon.org and put "speaker series" in the subject line.

THE CALIFORNIA SPOTTED OWL

ANU KRAMER

ONLINE

Thursday, February 17
7 p.m. program
Zoom

"How do different kinds of fire influence the California spotted owl?" We examined owl behavior in a high-severity mega-fire, as well as in fire-restored National Parks and found consistent preferences regarding fire severity and patch size that inform future forest and fire management throughout the region and influence the future of these owls as well as human communities and the Sierra Nevada ecosystem as a whole.

Anu Kramer received her doctorate in 2016 from the University of California – Berkeley in Environmental Science, Policy, and Management, where she specialized in fire ecology, GIS, and remote sensing. She has been a researcher with the Peery Lab at the University of Wisconsin – Madison since 2018, where she works primarily with California spotted owls.



Sheila Whitmore

California spotted owl in burned snag nest.

CONNECTING ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION

IVAN PHILLIPSEN

ONLINE

Thursday, March 17
7 p.m. program
Zoom

Conservation of the world's bird and wildlife diversity has become a topic of enormous importance in the 21st century. Ecotourism is among the many approaches for channeling resources into conservation efforts. This presentation will explore some ways that we can help protect the natural world by experiencing it through travel.

Ivan is a dedicated naturalist with a background in scientific research. He holds a M.S. in Biology from Cal State San Bernardino and a doctorate in Zoology from Oregon State University. As Co-owner of Wild Latitudes, Ivan has been able to apply his knowledge in crafting and leading ecotours around the world.



Ivan Phillipsen

New Zealand Kaka.

DONATIONS

Thank you for being part of our donor and member community.

We are deeply appreciative of every individual, business, and organization who supports Golden Gate Audubon. In this issue we recognize our new members in 2021 and all our major donors from the past year, January 1, 2021 through December 1, 2021.

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Thank you to all our members, including these new members who joined Golden Gate Audubon for the first time this year.

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Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

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4 Berkeley Bird Festival

The first ever Berkeley Bird festival brought beginner and seasoned birders out to support their feathered neighbors.

5 Ashy Storm-petrels and the Farallones

The endangered Ashy Storm-petrel under threat of extinction from invasive house mice on the Farallon Islands.

6 Speaker Series

Winter is the perfect time to learn how to plant a beautiful native garden that equally attracts and benefits local birds.

BACKYARD BIRDER

Rick Lewis



Western Bluebird at Crab Cove in Alameda.

WESTERN BLUEBIRD

BY LYDIA BRUNO AND RYAN NAKANO

Often seen perching on fence posts or wires near open fields dotted with trees or open woodlands, the Western Bluebird is striking at first glance, especially the male with his deep terracotta breast and gleaming cobalt blue neck, wings, back and tail. His partner's coloring is more subtle, with her peach colored breast, soft gray back and wings shaded gently with blue.

Found throughout the western U.S., extending down into Mexico, the Western Bluebird is social during the nonbreeding season, often

seen flying in small groups and feasting on berries in trees including fruit from Juniper, Mistletoe and Elderberry plants. They also love dining on insects, enjoying grasshoppers, caterpillars, ants, beetles and moths, to name a few.

During the breeding season, they often migrate south, arriving in early spring and lingering into fall. The male scouts out potential nesting sites, usually natural hollows in oaks or pines or old woodpecker holes, and sings to defend his territory. Nesting boxes set on fence posts are also attractive options, though no matter where he goes, competition is fierce and he often has to fend off competitors, particularly Tree Swallows.

After courting the female by fluttering in front of her, wings and tail spread, serenading her with his song, the business of building the nest commences. The female being the primary architect, creates a cup of weeds, grasses and twigs. She'll lay on average four to six pale blue eggs and both parents will share the duty of bringing food to the nestlings. The young will fledge within two to three weeks and the parents may attempt another brood.

Due to loss of habitat and nesting sites among other significant factors, Western Bluebird populations are in decline. Their preferred nesting cavities are often found in dead trees which are frequently cut down and removed. Nesting boxes help fill this void, yet, like human shelter, the supply is not keeping up with demand.

If you have a yard, building a nesting box is an easy and effective way to help maintain Western Bluebird populations. Cornell's Nestwatch website (<https://nestwatch.org>) provides detailed instructions on how to build and maintain these boxes.